

Guessing and knowing

U.S. INTELLIGENCE AND THE SOVIET STRATEGIC THREAT

By Lawrence Freedman.
Macmillan. 236 pages. £10.

Since Hiroshima burnt in 1945, most city dwellers have had to get used to living with the idea that sudden ruin from the sky might one day frizzle them too. This book is a highly intelligent guide to the business of guessing whether or when this sort of disaster might occur. It describes how matters are handled in Washington, on the assumption that it may be Russian missiles that make the bang. The author wrote an earlier version as an Oxford doctoral thesis under the watchful eyes of Alastair Buchan and, after his death, of Philip Williams. He has transformed his learned formulae into a book that grips the attention and clears the mind of any reader who is concerned at the state of the world and who can forgive a writer so soaked in Americana that he can break up a chapter with the cross-heading "Perceptions of the Minuteman vulnerability problem".

Mr Freedman understands the working of any effective intelligence system: the tendency for people who belong to a uniformed service to accept hierarchic necessity, rather than logic or truth, as a guide; the readiness of staff officers to plan for the worst case; and the penalties of over-insurance that follow. Something is observable here that can be compared to what Keynes in his "General Theory" called the multiplier: a point worth further analysis, either now by Mr Freedman or by some much later historian after the ashes have been cleared away. He can spot points of pure politics as well: by 1973, for instance, "Mr Kissinger was making himself the chief intelligence officer of the administration, as well as the chief consumer of intelligence".

The author has grasped and not been overwhelmed by the language of current tactical analysis: circular error probable, proportion of aborts, endo- or exo-atmospheric interception and the rest. (Biplanes were still being used for interception within living memory.) He has seized the much more important point, that assessment of capability gives no sure guide to intention; and realises that the only intelligence officer who is any use is the one who has got inside his potential adversary's mind and has started to understand it.